DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 379 CS 008 353

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TITLE Congruence of Beliefs and Practices of Elementary and Special Education Majors.
PUB DATE Dec 85
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (35th, San Diego, CA, December 3-7, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beliefs; Congruence (Psychology); *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Education; Higher Education; *Learning Theories; Preservice Teacher Education; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Research; Special Education Teachers; *Student Attitudes; Teaching Methods; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS Reading Beliefs Inventory

ABSTRACT

A study identified individuals' beliefs about learning and practices in reading and the degree of congruence between the two. Sixty-two undergraduate elementary and special education majors enrolled in the first of three reading methods courses completed the Reading Beliefs Inventory (RBI). In the first part of the RBI, consisting of 10 categories with statements representing three psychological-philosophical views, subjects selected the one statement that most closely matched their personal beliefs. The categories were definition of man, motivation, learning conditions, social learning, intellectual development, knowledge, instruction, curriculum, organization, and evaluation. In the second part of the RBI, consisting of 12 paragraphs describing an instructional situation along with possible teacher reactions representing three models of reading, subjects again chose the one closest to their personal beliefs. The 12 categories in this section consisted of defining the reading process, beginning reading, context clues, new vocabulary, phonics, sight vocabulary, meaningful word parts, developing a meaning vocabulary, oral versus silent reading, comprehension, materials, and attitudes. Results indicated that undergraduate elementary and special education majors generally held beliefs about education that were cognitive in nature. Three pages of references and tables of data are appended. (HOD)

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CONGRUENCE OF BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF ELEMENTARY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION MAJORS

All teachers bring to the classroom a personal philosophy of education and their own theories regarding how children learn (Bigge, 1982). Educational theorists also contend that teachers' beliefs and values (MacDonald, Wolfson, & Zaret, 1973; Combs, 1965), personal philosophies of education (Marshall, 1973), knowledge of curriculum theories (Johnson, 1967) and models of reading (Harste & Burke, 1977) should be fundamental components in determining their instructional practices. However, some research suggests that, to the contrary, teachers are not aware of the lack of congruence between their stated beliefs about education and their instructional practices (Dobson, Sewell, & Shelton, 1974).

This awareness gap should be of particular concern to those responsible for the training of new teachers. The implication being that as teachers

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become more aware of their own philosophical beliefs regarding their instructional practices they may also become more effective teachers. This concept guided the present study which linked curriculum theory and models of reading for the purpose of investigating the concept of congruence between beliefs and practices in reading of undergraduate education majors.

Current classroom practices, materials used, grading procedures and management techniques suggest three distinct psychological-philosophical camps of educational thought and three theoretical models of reading. On closer examination certain common elements emerge between the curriculum theories and models of reading.

At one end of the curriculum continuum lies Behaviorism-Essentialism. Behaviorism views education in terms of the external environment and the control it exerts upon student learning (Watson, 1924; Thorndike & Gates, 1930; Skinner, 1974). Essentialist philosophers like Bagley (1938) and Hutchins (1938) argued for student mastery of a core curriculum. Similarly the Bottom-Up reading theorists (Gough, 1972; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974) believe that the printed page is the external force controlling the reader's behavior and that it is crucial for all students to master the essential skills of reading in a prescribed sequential order.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the Humanistic-Existentialist perspective and Top-Down model. Humanists such as Maslow (1962) and Rogers (1969) emphasize the freedom of individuals to choose for themselves and the importance of self growth, while Existentialism in education (see Kneller, 1964; Wingo, 1974) believes in the absolute freedom of the student to choose, to act and accept responsibility. The Top-Down model of reading (Goodman,

1970; Smith, 1971) begins with the knowledge and experiences of the reader and places a similar faith in the student's right to choose and direct learning.

Lying midway between the above two positions are the Cognitive Field/Pragmatism and Interactive-Compensatory views. Cognitive-Field psychology studies the unique interrelationship between the individual learner and a specific learning environment (Bigge & Hunt, 1980). Pragmatist philosophy views schooling in practical terms as it relates to the world and society (Dewey, 1940). Advocates of the Interactive-Compensatory model (Rumelhart, 1977; Stanovich, 1980) view reading also as an interaction between higher and lower order processes in which the reader synthesizes patterns based upon information provided simultaneously from several sources.

METHOD

Materials

For this study the Reading Beliefs Inventory (RBI) (copyright, Yellin & Combs, 1985) was utilized to identify an individual's beliefs about learning and practices in reading and the degree of congruence between the two. Part I of the RBI (Beliefs About Education) was a modification of an instrument designed by Dobson, Dobson and Kessinger (1980). Part I consisted of ten categories each of which contained three statements representing the three psychological-philosophical views. Subjects were directed to select the one statement that most closely matched their personal beliefs. The categories were: Definition of Man; Motivation; Learning Conditions; Social Learning; Intellectual Development; Knowledge; Instruction; Curriculum; Organization; and Evaluation.

Part II (Practices in Reading Instruction) consisted of 12 categories

each containing a paragraph describing an instructional situation along with possible teacher reactions representing the three models of reading. Subjects were again directed to choose the statement which most closely matched their personal beliefs. The categories were: Defining the Reading Process; Beginning Reading; Context Clues; New Vocabulary; Phonics; Sight Vocabulary; Meaningful Word Parts; Developing a Meaning Vocabulary; Oral vs. Silent Reading; Comprehension; Materials; and Attitudes.

The data collected allowed the authors to determine the degree of congruence among the subjects. It also served as the stimulus for dialogue regarding the significance of congruence between beliefs and practices.

Subjects and Procedures

The subjects in this study were 62 undergraduate elementary and special education majors enrolled in the first of three reading methods courses at a comprehensive mid-western university. All subjects attended two lectures and one discussion group per week for a semester.

During the second week of the semester, the subjects were administered the Reading Beliefs Inventory (RBI) and the results served as a stimulus for dialogue. Utilizing a chart developed by the authors, students were shown what each response represented according to the categories in Parts I and II. The degree of congruence between a student's stated beliefs and preferred practices in reading was discussed. During the remainder of the semester, dialogue concerning the importance of congruence between beliefs and practices continued. After ten weeks of class, the RBI was readministered and returned. Post test responses were charted beside the pretest results for comparison and discussion.

To be considered congruent within beliefs about education, a student must have had a majority of responses in one of the psychological-philosophical camps for Part I. A student was considered incongruent if there was no dominant camp, but rather an equal number of responses in two of the camps. Congruence for practices in reading for Part II were identified in the same manner. The degree of congruence increased as the student's score approached either 10 for beliefs about education or 12 for practices in reading.

Congruence between beliefs and practices, for purposes of this study, was measured by comparing scores for both Part I and II based upon the beliefs/practicee linkage described earlier. A student would be considered as having beliefs/practices congruence when, for example, the score from Part I indicated a preference for cognitive beliefs about education and the score from Part II indicated a preference for interactive practices in reading.

RESULTS

This study addressed three questions. 1) Upon entrance into the professional course sequence, what do undergraduate elementary and special education majors believe about education and reading? 2) Initially, are their stated beliefs about education congruent with their preferred practices in reading? 3) Does awareness of beliefs about education and practices in reading lead to a change in beliefs/practices congruence?

Initial Beliefs About Education

Upon entrance into the professional course sequence, a majority of the students held beliefs about education which were cognitively oriented, as

determined by responses on Part I of the RBI. Responses were not distributed equally among each of the psychological-philosophical camps identified. The percentage of students who were congruent within each of the camps is shown in Table 1. In addition, students who were incongruent in their beliefs are also reported. The mean level of congruence for beliefs was 6.27 out of 10.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Initial Beliefs About Reading

Preferred practices in reading, as determined by initial responses to Part II of the RBI, were more diverse than beliefs about education. The percentage of students who were congruent within each of the models of reading is shown in Table 2. Students shown as a combination of models were considered incongruent since they did not have a majority of responses in one of the three models. The mean level of congruence for practices in reading was 6.74 out of 12.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Initial Beliefs/Practices Congruence

Upon entrance into the professional sequence, only 35% of the students expressed beliefs about education that were congruent with their preferred practices in reading, in view of the linkage established earlier. For these students, all but one could be characterized as expressing a cognitive/interactive congruence. The low percentage of beliefs/practices

congruence can be accounted for by two groups of students, those who expressed cognitive beliefs about education with top-down practices in reading (26%) and those who expressed cognitive beliefs with bottom-up practices in reading (11%).

Change in Beliefs/Practices Congruence

On the post test, there was a general shift away from behavioristic views and toward humanistic views. The percentage of students who were congruent and incongruent within their beliefs on the post test is shown in Table 1. Upon closer examination of changes for individual students, other patterns become apparent as presented in Table 3. The number of students with incongruent beliefs decreased from pretest to post test. There was also a shift between students who expressed cognitive and humanistic views. The mean level of congruence for beliefs on the post test was 6.65 out of 10. This was not a significant increase from the pretest.

Insert Table 3 About Here

From pretest to post test there was a greater change in views about practices in reading than for beliefs about education as reflected in Table 2. The major shifts appeared to be in favor of the top-down model of reading. Closer examination of changes for individual students, as presented in Table 4, revealed a number of shifts to interactive as well as top-down. In addition, there was a slight decrease in the number of incongruent students. The mean level of congruence for practices in reading on the post test was 7.21 out of 12, which was not a significant increase from the pretest.

Insert Table 4 About Here

On the post test, 42% of the students expressed beliefs which were congruent with their stated views about reading practices. This does not reflect a significant change from the pretest. However, congruent students were split between a cognitive/interactive orientation and a humanistic/top-down orientation. The greatest number of incongruent students was accounted for by those who expressed cognitive beliefs with top-down views of reading (39%). Fourteen students (23%) who had been congruent on the pretest became incongruent on the post test because their views about reading shifted to a top-down perspective while their beliefs about education remained cognitively oriented. There was no apparent pattern of change, however, for the 17 students (27%) who were congruent on the post test, but incongruent on the pretest.

DISCUSSION

Upon entrance into the professional sequence, we found that undergraduate elementary and special education majors generally held beliefs about education that were cognitive in nature. We expected to find more diversity in beliefs, especially toward the humanistic end of the continuum. Student's beliefs, however, were not solidly rooted yet, as reflected in the low mean for the degree of congruence of beliefs.

Views about practices in reading initially were more diverse than beliefs. Since students had no previous experience in reading instruction, we feel their views were a result of personal school experiences and, as such,

expected to find more bottom-up responses. The low mean for degree of congruence suggested some conflict in ideas about reading practices which seemed consistent with their lack of experience.

Awareness of beliefs and practices did not significantly change the degree of congruence within either beliefs or practices. However, students did reflect upon and alter their beliefs or views about reading during this time. In addition, the number of students who initially expressed a combination of beliefs or practices and were considered incongruent decreased during the semester.

Overall, the percentage of students who were considered congruent between beliefs and practices also was not significantly increased through awareness. With the identification of personal beliefs and exposure to new ideas about reading instruction, students began to revise their views about practices in reading more than their personal beliefs about education. Students seemed to focus more upon the immediate, such as the course content, and were not able to simultaneously reflect upon their beliefs in relation to practices in reading.

We believe that disciplines, such as reading, cannot be taught exclusive of personal beliefs. Prospective teachers must have continued opportunities to integrate beliefs about education with the content they are expected to teach.

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Table 1

Percentage of Students With Congruent and Incongruent Beliefs About Education

	Congruent			Incongruent	
Beliefs	Behavioristic	Cognitive	Humanistic	Behavioristic–Cognitive	Cognitive–Humanistic
Pretest	1.6	82.2	6.5	3.2	6.5
Post test	0	80.7	14.5	0	4.8

Table 2

Percentage of Students With Congruent and Incongruent Views of Practices in Reading Instruction

	Congruent			Incongruent		
Beliefs	Bottom-Up	Interactive	Humanistic	Bottom-Up Interactive	Interactive-Top-Down	Bottom-Up Interactive Top-Down
Pretest	14.5	41.9	29.1	3.2	9.7	1.6
Post test	6.5	25.0	53.2	0	8.1	3.2

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Table 3

Percentage of Student Change for Beliefs About Education From Pretest to Post Test

	Post Test				
	Congruent			Incongruent	
	Behavioristic	Cognitive	Humanistic	Behavioristic-Cognitive	Cognitive-Humanistic
Pretest					
Congruent					
Behavioristic	——	1.6	——	——	——
Cognitive	——	——	8.1	——	4.8
Humanistic	——	4.8	——	——	——
Incongruent					
Behavioristic-Cognitive	——	1.6	1.6	——	——
Cognitive-Humanistic	——	3.2	3.2	——	——

Table 4

Percentage of Student Change for Practices in Reading

From Pretest to Post Test

	Post Test					
	Congruent			Incongruent		
	Bottom-Up	Interactive	Top-Down	Bottom-Up Interactive	Interactive-Top-Down	Bottom-Up Interactive Top-Down
Pretest						
Congruent						
Bottom-Up	——	1.6	8.1	——	——	1.6
Interactive	3.2	——	16.1	——	8.1	——
Top-Down	——	4.8	——	——	——	1.6
Incongruent						
Bottom-Up Interactive	——	3.2	——	——	——	——
Interactive Top-Down	——	3.2	6.5	——	——	——
Bottom-Up Interactive Top-Down	——	1.6	——	——	——	——

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